

September __, 2021

Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means

Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
House Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means

Honorable Daniel Hunt
House Chair
House Committee on Federal Stimulus and Census Oversight

Honorable John Keenan
Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

Honorable James Arciero
House Chair
Joint Committee on Housing

In Support of Passage and Funding of an Act promoting housing stability and homelessness prevention in Massachusetts S. 874 (Sen. Sal DiDomenico), H. 1436 (Rep. David Rogers and Rep. Michael Day)

As members of the health care and public health community, we urge swift **passage of S. 874 and H. 1436 to create a statewide right to counsel program for eviction cases and fund it with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds in the amount of \$78 million** over three years (\$26 million/year).

In June, noting the public health benefits of legal representation, **Connecticut passed a statewide right to counsel program for eviction cases and funded it with ARPA funding over the next two years** while a permanent source of funding is located.

Massachusetts needs to seize this critical opportunity to do the same.

Last year, members of the health care and public health community joined with municipal leaders and community advocates and urged Governor Baker to fund an emergency statewide access to counsel pilot program during the pandemic. The Governor answered the call and created a temporary program with COVID relief funding, the COVID Eviction Legal Help Project. Quickly scaling up during the fall of 2020, by the end of June 2021, the project helped over 7,700 people of which at least 2,600 were children. Massachusetts needs to hold onto the success of this project and not lose the investment that has been made.

Now more than ever with dominance of the Delta variant and the start of the school year, public health and housing stability are inextricably intertwined.

- Evictions increase child malnutrition and poor child health.
- Evictions increase maternal depression, and evictions during pregnancy are associated with low birth weight and premature birth, which can have lifelong health impacts.

- The threat of eviction causes high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.
- People who have been evicted and are experiencing homelessness are more likely to contract infections, have higher rates of hospitalization for asthma, and have a higher prevalence of behavioral and mental health problems, including suicidal ideations.

Evictions further fuel racial health inequities. Due to the persistent discrimination in housing, Black and Latinx people are more likely to rent, more likely to struggle to pay rent, and more likely to be evicted. The inequity extends to access to legal representation where tenants are almost always unrepresented and face a complicated legal system alone. In Fiscal Year 2020, only 8.5% of tenants in Massachusetts had legal representation in eviction cases, whereas 81% of landlords had a lawyer.

By adopting a right to counsel as part of a comprehensive response to housing stability, Massachusetts can address these inequities and level the playing field.

We urge the Massachusetts Legislature to make an investment, as other states have done, and through ARPA funds launch a strong Right to Counsel that makes sense for our Commonwealth.

We thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,